

The Kaiser and His Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany

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Author:

John Röhl

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When it first appeared in hardback in 1994, John Rohl's remarkable collection of essays won the Wolfson History Prize. And clearly it deserved to. This is how history should be written--with lucidity and originality, displaying on every page the workings of an inquiring mind, one that has examined and re-examined all available sources to reach its own, independent conclusions. Rohl deserves the congratulations of the entire historical profession for his research, for anyone interested in the history of modern Germany now stands permanently in his debt.

His main conclusion regarding Wilhelmine Germany is that from 1897 it was run as a "functioning monarchy" with power concentrated in the hands of one man (thought by many who knew him to be mad) and that, as a result, "the Kaiser, the royal family, the Kaiser's circle of friends, the [imperial entourage and the court form] the heart of this system on which the very highest officials of the Reich and state bureaucracy (as well as the leaders of the army and the navy) were psychologically dependent." The Reich Chancellor could therefore become, in Bulow's phrase, merely "the executive tool of His Majesty, so to speak, his political Chief of Staff" with the result that "the restoration under Kaiser Wilhelm II of a genuinely functioning monarchy claiming legitimation by Divine Right one hundred years after the French Revolution was even more forced, artificial, anachronistic [and] grotesque" (than the government of Germany had been under Bismarck.) Rohl proves this by examining not merely the character of the Kaiser and his court, but by analysing the roles of the higher civil service, the armed forces, the diplomatic service

and the "kingship mechanism" which held the whole system together.

According to Rohl, the new system emerged in stages: the period 1888-1890 was dominated by the conflict with the 'all-powerful' Bismarck; the years 1890-1897 were ones of transition from an "improvised" to "an institutionalised personal rule" (the latter phrase borrowed from the German constitutional historian, Huber); the period 1897 -1908 represented Bulow's promised "personal rule in the good sense" (i.e. with the cooperation of a sycophantic Chancellor), a period which may well have extended till 1914 (Rohl calls for more research here); while during the First World War, Rohl agrees with the historical consensus that Wilhelm was merely a "shadow emperor".

Almost all the controversial legislation of the Wilhelmine period, according to Rohl, can be traced back to the Kaiser's own initiative. Such legislation included the Lex Heinze of 1891 against prostitution; the education laws announced in his speech of December 1890; the great Army Law of 1893 which the War Minister was simply "commanded" to prepare through a Flügeladjutant on the third anniversary of the Kaiser's accession to the throne; the moderate trade treaties and customs tariffs of the early 1890s and again of a decade later, which the Kaiser demanded despite the extreme demands of the East Elbian landed nobility; although the best examples of the Kaiser's personal rule, according to Rohl, were "the social and socialist policies, the gigantic fleet-building programme and the Prussian canal policy." The building of the fleet was, of course, to have tremendous consequences driving Great Britain into the arms of Russia and France and thus helping Germany lose the First World War. Yet even Admiral von Hollman, the Secretary of State in the Reich Navy Office admitted in 1896 "that there [were] not as many as ten people in the Reichstag in favour of the great future fleet plans" while Tirpitz himself wrote to the Grand Duke of Baden in 1903 that "genuine enthusiasm among the people and therefore also among their parliamentary representatives is lacking for the vigorous development of our forces at sea."

It was little wonder, therefore, that by 1902 Maximilian Harden was writing in *Die Zukunft* that "the Kaiser (was) his own Reich Chancellor" and that "all the important decisions of the past twelve years [had] been taken by him." The situation was such that no high-ranking minister, army or naval officer, courtier or civil servant would risk disagreeing with the Kaiser in case he dismissed them- negative personal rule" in John Rohl's phrase. Thus Bulow once told Holstein: "I cannot consider it useful to make suggestions to His Majesty the Kaiser which have no prospect of actual success and only make him annoyed with me." Tirpitz likewise informed the Grand Duke of Baden regarding a hoped-for intervention: "I would be worsening my position in relation to H. M. for a subsidiary aim without any hope of success." Wilhelm did not even like ministers to submit their own resignations--that showed too much independence- although a frosty glance, a curt dismissal, a lack of conversation or an imperial contradiction might all be motives for resignation none the less. In the end courtiers, diplomats, civil servants and officers all became sycophants. Amongst the Kaiser's most intimate circle, this sycophancy could take the strangest forms--with one mediatised imperial count allowing himself to be led before the Kaiser imitating a poodle "with a marked rectal opening" while the Chief of the Military Cabinet could dance before him dressed in a tutu and a feather hat. Bulow, none the less, could justify the regime before the Reichstag in 1903 with the words: "The German people do not want a shadow Kaiser, the German people want a Kaiser made of flesh and blood. "

The one they got was probably mad. Certainly, he always remained immature, with one courtier complaining in 1908: "he is a child and will always remain one." He was also an egomaniac with a complete over-estimation of his own abilities which he loved to talk about. Unfortunately these did not include a sense of reality, for he saw things only as he wished. Thus the French and English were once described in a racial diatribe as "not Whites at all but Blacks" while Jesus of Nazareth, he claimed, "had never been a Jew." Nor did he have any sense of proportion or moderation, always calling for revenge on enemies who had to die or be punished, since he hated all sorts of groups and classes, not to mention individuals such as his parents. His sense of humour, perhaps not surprisingly therefore, included hitting, beating, stabbing or otherwise humiliating colleagues and servants. As far as his sex life was concerned, he had innumerable affairs with prostitutes before ascending the throne in 1888, after which time he became more interested in men, particularly- soldiers. Whether he was an active homosexual is open to dispute - although Harden believed he had hard evidence. What is not open to dispute is that through his close friend Count Philipp zu

Eulenburg and his circle, he did mix mainly with homosexuals. Indeed, Rohl comments: "It is indeed disturbing to reflect that the generals who took Germany and Europe into the Armageddon of 1914 not infrequently owed their career to the Kaiser's admiration for their height and good looks in their splendid uniforms."

Yet homosexuality, repressed or not, was not the fundamentally disturbing fact of the Kaiser's life. That was, rather, his physical and mental problems. He had a withered left arm and was later to suffer deafness in the right ear. The most important fact, however, was that he suffered from growths and discharges in the inner ear near the brain, a condition which drove him almost mad. Lord Salisbury thought him "not quite normal", Sir Edward Grey, "not quite sane". Other European dignitaries thought him "mentally ill" or having "a screw loose." Leading German princes and statesmen felt the same, with Bismarck explaining that he had only wanted to remain in office after 1888 because he knew of Wilhelm's "abnormal mental condition", something which even Eulenburg was shocked and frightened by. Indeed, on one occasion Eulenburg recorded: "Pale, ranting wildly, looking restlessly about him and piling lie upon lie, he made such a terrible impression on me that I still cannot get over it."

Such Hitler-like rages made Eulenburg predict an imperial nervous breakdown, something, however, that never occurred. Still, there were occasions when rumours spread that the Kaiser would have to be committed--again, something which never actually took place. Fits of rage, unfortunately, were not the only characteristic that the Kaiser shared with Hitler. Full-blooded anti-Semitism was another and Rohl makes it perfectly clear that Wilhelm II had nothing to learn in this respect from the Fuhrer. If, like Hitler, he had Jewish friends as a youth, he later turned on the Jews as Germany's most deadly enemy, informing Sir Edward Grey, for example, in 1907 that "They want stamping out." He also believed in an international conspiracy of Jewish capitalists and communists - the Golden International, blaming the First World War, Germany's defeat and his own - abdication on an international } conspiracy of Jewish freemasons, so that in exile in Holland his anti-Semitism reached fever pitch. In 1919 he wrote to General von Mackensen: "Let no German... rest until these parasites have been destroyed and exterminated." He called for an international, Russian-style pogrom against them condemning them as a "nuisance" that humanity must in some way destroy. Then in his own hand, he added: " I believe the best would be gas." It was altogether natural, therefore, that, before he died in June 1941, he welcomed Hitler's victories as confirmation of the fighting qualities of the troops of 1914-1918. He boasted: " The hand of God is creating a new World and working miracles...We are becoming a U.S. of Europe under German leadership, a united European Continent, nobody ever hoped to see.....The Jews are being (sic) thrust out of their nefarious positions in all countries, whom they have driven to hostility for centuries."

Rohl also believes that, like Hitler, the Kaiser was responsible for starting a world war. His analysis of the December 1912 War Council makes clear that the people who counted were the Kaiser's naval and military friends and that the civilian leaders--the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary-- took second place. As a result, the 1913 Army Bill was pushed through, naval plans for war against Britain were prepared, stockpiling of gold and fodder was approved and the course set for war in 1914 when the Kiel Canal would be ready - as Tirpitz demanded. Moltke, of course, wanted war straight away. Rohl makes clear that, despite early doubts, the Kaiser gave unconditional support to Austria during the First Balkan War and was ready to unleash a world war to defend Austria- Hungary's position in the Balkans. In short the "blank cheque" of 1914 was ready for delivery as soon as the other preparations were completed. Rohl doesn't say so in his book, but I know from seminar discussions with him, that he suspects that Berlin may even have been behind Franz Ferdinand's assassination at Sarajevo in 1914.

The other main point of Rohl's book is the importance of court society for both the Kaiser and the "kingship mechanism." If, once again, there are parallels here with Hitler's Reich, Rohl does not make them. Instead, he is concerned to demonstrate in great detail how anachronistic imperial Germany was at the top. Thus, in terms of the civil list, it proved to be the most monarchical society in the entire world, for with an income from state revenue of 2.2 million marks annually, the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II cost more than the Reich Chancellor, the Reich Chancellery, the Foreign Office (including the whole of the diplomatic corps and consular service), the Colonial Office and the Reich Justice Administration put together. To compare this

with foreign monarchies, Rohl points out that Edward VII received only the equivalent of 11.6 million marks per annum, with only Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary receiving a nearly equal sum of 19.2 million marks. (The King of Italy received 12.8 million.) Yet, as Rohl reminds us, within the boundaries of imperial Germany were to be found around twenty other courts whose own civil lists were substantial. For example, the Bavarian court with 5.4 million marks and the Saxon court with 4.2 million stood at eighth and ninth place in the world respectively immediately after Japan. Altogether these other courts received about 20 million marks in state subsidies leaving the Germans to pay around 42 million marks in taxes for courts within the Kaiserreich. The British meanwhile paid only a quarter of that for a court which was the centre of a world empire. Altogether the Prussian-German court under Wilhelm II employed at least 3,500 officials of whom 2,320 were salaried. Together they formed a huge and prestigious body, far larger than the Prussian and Reich bureaucracy combined, with many diverse functions. The court itself divided members into 62 different grades (the Austrian and Saxon courts had five, the Bavarian three) and the system of court precedence was a matter of the greatest importance to aristocrats. Not that everyone was impressed by the precise and endless ceremonial. The younger Moltke wrote in 1905, for example, of the court: "...it is as if the dead had risen up complete with pigtailed and powder." Still, many of those excluded from it, would have done practically anything to join it.

It is now time to consider Rohl's work more critically. It seems to me that there are three aspects of it which prompt questions. First, does he not exaggerate its uniqueness? Secondly, has he taken it out of the wider context of German social and political history? Finally, can his Fischerite -views on Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of World War One be supported? Regarding the first question, Rohl's assertion that "historically speaking this attempt by the Wilhelminians to introduce, on the threshold of the twentieth century, a monarchy by the grace of God with a neo-absolutist court culture can probably be compared only with the absolutist designs of Charles I of England, who was beheaded in the middle of the Civil War in January 1649, or with Charles X of France, who had to flee abroad after the bloodless revolution of July 1830, however wanting such comparisons are bound to be", strikes me as preposterous. How does he think the Habsburg Monarchy was run under Franz Joseph or imperial Russia under Nicholas II? Both had anachronistic courts, both considered they ruled by the grace of God, neither believed in constitutionalism, neither was particularly bright, both were prepared to risk world war, and both kept a tight command on their armed forces. It would also be enlightening to know what proportion of their state revenues were devoted to their courts. Would the picture in terms of percentage of GDP have been very different from the one for Wilhelm's Germany? Even the example of Napoleon III might have been more relevant and less distant in time.

With regard to internal German developments, Rohl is, in my view, on firmer ground. Wehler's model of a Germany run by the "anonymous forces of authoritarian polycracy" does not very evidently fit the facts. Decisions after all, in any polity, have to be taken by real individuals and in the case of imperial Germany, Rohl has shown that the most important ones were mainly taken by the Kaiser. The anonymous forces, on the other hand, seem to have been the elites who surrounded him but who failed to make their voices heard or to offer any political opposition. Nor can any weight be lent to Volker Berghahn's view that the bureaucracy and other groups took control of the country during the second half of Wilhelm's reign. Neither the Holstein papers, the Eulenburg papers, Walter Peter Fuch's' edition of reports from the envoys of Baden at Berlin, nor the works of distinguished historians such as Hull, Lerman and Afflerbach support such a conclusion. Nor did foreign diplomats notice that the influence of the Kaiser had been undermined. Yet, there is perhaps a case for agreeing with David Blackburn's judgment in his recent Fontana history of Germany that Rohl "may be pressing the case a little hard." He might for example have pointed to the remarkable vigour of popular politics in Wilhelmine Germany with turn-outs for Reichstag elections measuring 84% in 1912 and 94.2% in a by-election in 1913. There was also a brisk trade in tickets for seats in the Reichstag gallery. The rise of the SPD and the popular press might also have been investigated. Perhaps Rohl's book could have been profitably rounded off with a chapter putting the development of the "kingship mechanism" into the wider context of politics at large with a view to demonstrating the tensions that arose from operating such a system in an emerging democracy, albeit a pseudo-democracy.

Was the result, for example, the need to wage a war in order to win popular approval? It is here that we confront the Fischer thesis with which Rohl agrees and which he believes most historians now accept. I personally am a great admirer of Fischer, but I would hesitate to state that he has won the argument. Certainly, I would like more emphasis given to the situation in Vienna, where the Emperor Franz Joseph was certainly guilty of deliberately starting a war. His main reasons, were great power politics and the need to preserve imperial honour. Why then did Wilhelm give him a blank cheque? Clearly, the decision-making processes were not all that different in Berlin, nor indeed, were the motives. The same, I think goes for St. Petersburg. None of the monarchs involved felt that he could suffer or honourably survive a diplomatic setback. But were issues of domestic policy primary? And was war inevitable? Fischer (and Rohl), I believe, are correct in pointing to German plans for war and aggression and for demonstrating the secondary weight of Bethmann-Hollweg. On the other hand, Wilhelm in July 1914 - just as during the First Balkan War - proved capable of changing his mind and was probably not thinking primarily of domestic forces at all. Even if Austria-Hungary and Germany been constitutional monarchies in 1914, I think the risk of world war breaking out would have been grave.

Finally, a few thoughts on continuity in German foreign policy. The more one reads Rohl, the more one is impressed by the similarities between the Kaiser and Hitler. Even the court system was in many ways a prelude to the Third Reich where courtiers like Goering, Goebbels, and Himmler all competed for the Fuhrer's favour, there being no alternative bureaucratic system. Hitler's anti-Semitism, his war aims, his rages etc. were all frighteningly similar to the Kaiser's. Still, as Rohl wisely points out; "the First World War did not have to come. " Friedrich III might have survived; Wilhelm I might have died much sooner, allowing liberalism a chance to flourish in Germany under his son rather than a personal rule under his grandson. On the other hand, these similarities between the Kaiser and Hitler cannot simply be dismissed as coincidences. Hitler, after all was a product of both the Habsburg Monarchy and Wilhelmine Germany, however unfair that may seem to the latter. His ideals were those of many young Germans, even if his determination and anti-Semitism dwarfed theirs. He was the product not only of his own personality and genes, but of his time and place. That he, at one end of the social scale in German Europe, could develop views so similar to Wilhelm's at the other indicates that there remains a need for an intellectual dimension to imperial history that today may sound rather old-fashioned. None of this, however, is meant to detract from John Rohl's excellent book. Rarely have I enjoyed reading a collection of essays so much. Rarely have I yearned for more. Perhaps a second edition will deliver further chapters for our enlightenment and entertainment.

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